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Gorbachev's survival "increasingly uncertain," says CIA director

WASHINGTON, May 30 (AFP) - The outgoing chief of the Central Intelligence Agency, William Webster, Thursday called Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's political survival "increasingly uncertain" in the face of the country's unfolding economic collapse.

Speaking at his farewell news conference, the retiring CIA director said Mr. Gorbachev had switched back to his economic reform program after showing a conservative tendency to appease Soviet hardliners.

"The question is: Is it too late for Gorbachev," he said.

Mr. Webster said he thought the Soviet president would stick with his reform plan, but added: "I don't think it'll stop the republics on their way to the exit door."

"Gorbachev's future is increasingly uncertain," he said.

The Soviets are increasingly worried that economic erosion could loosen their control over the country's huge arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, according to the CIA director.

"We see them paying more attention to this in ways that would suggest they're not as confident," he said, adding: "This is an area we're going to have to watch very carefully."

Even though Moscow had requested Western aid, it did not appear to have a comprehensive plan for putting it to good use, said Mr. Webster, noting that little attention was paid to the country's crumbling infrastructure.

"I cannot understand why this has never been central to their objectives," he said.

Mr. Webster announced earlier this month that he would retire from his post at the end of his four-year term to practice law. Robert Gates, the deputy national security advisor, is to replace Mr. Webster pending Senate confirmation.